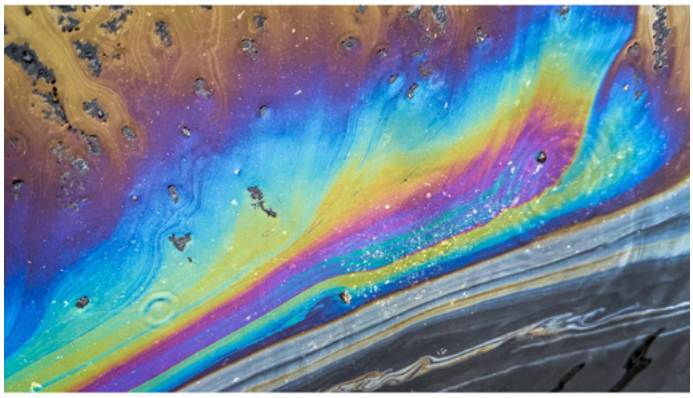
SEEING COLOR by Mary Doo

On a recent drizzly morning at my auto mechanic's shop, I saw a stream of colorful oil-stained water drifting toward a low spot on the asphalt pavement. It looked like a kaleidoscopic ribbon of blues, purples, and golds—an abstract painting in the making. I recalled seeing something similar before, at least in concept. (PSRI old-timers may remember Sandra Gaumont's award-winning image of colorful water captured in a gutter.)



Motor Oil Kaleidoscope

Where Colors Began - Religious discussions aside, I believe "Let there be light" was the universe's first physics lesson. Without light, nothing is visible in the vast darkness. When light shines into darkness, we begin to see different colors as objects interact with that light. Some colors are absorbed; some are reflected off the surface. The reflected colors are what we see.

Being a photographer for many years, I always thought composition was king—hence my obsession with the rule of thirds, leading lines, forms, and shapes. But I didn't really know until years later that most of my compositions were centered around color. When I see something interesting, most likely it has colors that are compelling. Then I compose around that. I suspect you probably do the same.

It has taken me years to learn to be "present"—to consciously notice that color is everywhere, waiting to be discovered. The photographer's task isn't always to seek out dramatic scenes, but to be ready to respond when color reveals itself. When I look back at my images and notice recurring colors, I understand my own visual voice more clearly.

Color theory is deep and somewhat confusing—at least to me. I've lost count of how many times my eyes glazed over hearing about millions of colors, 256 shades in Adobe, RGB, CMYK, ProPhoto, Kelvins, and white balances. The last one is slightly more palatable.

But advertisers understand color deeply. They use color theory and psychology brilliantly to sell products. I recently learned that Coca-Cola is the best-selling item at Costco—a fact unlikely explained by taste alone. I remember seeing Coke-red buildings and billboards, especially in developing countries. Perhaps we photographers, too, can bring more color intentionality into our images—whether for community, the environment, or simply for our own joy.

The Language of Colors - Among nature photographers, we especially love the gentle beauty of dawn and dusk—the alpenglow, the blue hours. We're drawn to the passion of red, the freshness of green, the vitality of orange, the energy of yellow, the luxury of gold, the majesty of purple, the peace of white, and yes—the introspection of blue and the mystery of black.

The colors we gravitate toward change with seasons, life stages, and emotional states. During calmer periods, we're drawn to harmony. At other times, we seek contrast. Our photographs become visual journals—recording not just what we see, but also reflecting how we feel.

It's worth noting that cultures interpret colors differently. White signifies weddings in the West but mourning in the East. Red means joy and weddings in the East, but can be alarming in the West. Colors are universal, yet culturally nuanced.

Colors of the Spirit - If Western color theory is about physics and psychology, then the colors of the Himalayas are about the soul and the elements. In Buddhist cultures such as Nepal and Tibet, color isn't decoration—it's sacred language, seen in the prayer flags flying across mountain passes:



Prayer flags in 5 colors

Blue for sky
White for air
Red for fire
Green for water
Yellow for earth

These aren't random choices—they're prayers for balance, carried by the wind.

Yellow (or saffron) is often reserved for the highest teachings and renunciation. Even architecture speaks in color: the stark white walls of stupas represent purity, adorned with strands of five-color flags.

The Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu is one of the world's largest spherical stupas. Its massive white dome represents the universe and the earth element, while the 13 levels of the spire represent the stages humans must pass through to achieve Nirvana. Every color—from gold to prayer flags—holds meaning. Traditionally, the five colors of the prayer flags appear in a specific order to maintain harmony in the universe.



Boudhanath Stupa (Nepal) with 5 color prayer flags



Nepali woman practicing "Prostration" at the Stupa, aligning with the colors of spiritual goals

Prostration as Prayer - The Nepali woman who appears crawling on the floor practices "prostration kora"—a devotion beyond what most pilgrims do. While others walk the clockwise circuit, she endures this physically draining meditative exercise. Watching her, I could almost feel the strain—it's no easy feat. In Tibetan and Nepali tradition, this is more than prayer; it's a physical practice designed to "trample the ego." Through the sacred colors she wears, she absorbs their spiritual qualities—blue for knowledge and healing, red for life force and compassion.



Sadhus (holy men) in saffron and yellow, representing the fire of spiritual purity

The Sadhus (Holy Men) dressed in vibrant colors, have renounced worldly life in dedication to the divine. Saffron represents spiritual fire that burns away ego and desire. Yellow symbolizes humility and stability. Red and white body paint remind us of both impermanence and ultimate reality.



Lighting butter lamps to dispel darkness, with the golden light of internal wisdom

The Light of Knowledge - In the glow of butter lamps, golden light represents knowledge dispelling ignorance. Yellow reflects renunciation and grounding; red symbolizes compassion and life force. Together, these lights create something sacred in the darkness.



One Stop Laundry: The vibrant blue and yellow of community and service

Colors in Everyday Life - A neighborhood laundry painted in blue and yellow reflects the colors of trust and friendliness. Yellow signals visibility and accessibility; blue conveys dependability. Chosen intentionally, these colors communicate welcome and reliability.

A Joyful Celebration! - Finally, a celebration of color itself. Umbrellas burst overhead in a rainbow spectrum. The girl in the center of the street, wearing red, links us back to that first colorful image on the mechanic's asphalt.



Celebration of Colors!

Color asks us to slow down and pay attention. Like music, it doesn't need explanation to be felt. When we allow color to lead rather than follow, our photographs are likely to gain depth and intentionality.

So look around—color is everywhere, waiting to be noticed to inspire your creativity.